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Guatemala: Development and Insurgency in the Northern Frontier

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An Intelligence Assessment

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
Office of Global Issues. It was coordinated with the
Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries
are welcome and may be directed to the Chief,
Geography Division, OGI, [redacted]

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**Guatemala: Development
and Insurgency in
the Northern Frontier** [redacted]

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 December 1982
was used in this report.*

During the past decade Guatemala's remote northern lowlands, as well as its western highlands, have witnessed a continuing struggle between leftist insurgents and government forces for control of the land and support of the people. As the violence intensified, programs aimed at relieving socioeconomic pressures in the overcrowded highlands—resettlement schemes, peasant-oriented agricultural projects, and other development efforts—were reduced or abandoned. The insurgents until recently appeared to be growing in strength. Within the last few months, however, US Embassy and other reports indicate that a government offensive may have turned the tide. Although no early victory over the guerrillas is likely, especially in the northern frontier, we believe that enough security will eventually be established to permit the resumption or acceleration of frontier development projects. [redacted]

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Pressure in the Highlands

Guatemala is a land of sharp contrasts, not only physically—with high volcanic mountains and vast, swampy lowlands—but in terms of socioeconomic conditions as well. A 1980 UN study noted, for example, that, despite economic growth, income distribution was even more skewed and inequitable in 1970 than it had been in 1940 and cited “enormous shortcomings in the country’s social development.” A recently completed internal planning document of the Guatemalan Government acknowledges that the country suffers from high unemployment, concentration of income, and a lack of social and economic integration; and it recognizes “an alarming deterioration in the quality of life of a great part of the population.” Poverty is most pervasive in the countryside, where two-thirds of the population lives. World Bank data from the late 1970s indicate that rural areas in particular suffer from a widespread lack of potable water, insufficient sewage facilities, and poor access to electricity.

Land distribution is more uneven in Guatemala than in any of its Central American neighbors, with three-fourths of the farms so small that together they account for less than one-tenth of the land under cultivation. Moreover, the agricultural work force includes many landless peasants—some 300,000, according to the 1979 Agricultural Census of Guatemala. Many of the high slopes of the volcanic Sierra Madre range and much of the remainder of the interior of western Guatemala are a patchwork of small commercial and subsistence farms—many of the latter extremely small (less than one hectare). Rapid population growth, averaging more than 3 percent annually, and the resulting pressure on the available land has forced many of the small peasant farmers to attempt cultivation on incredibly steep slopes, thereby causing extensive erosion and damaging areas at lower elevations that were otherwise suitable for agriculture.

Development of the Northern Frontier

Given the overcrowding of the highlands and the vital economic role of the large commercial farms—the country’s major foreign exchange earners—in the fertile Pacific coastal plain to the south, Guatemalan Government development plans have looked to the enormous but underused northern lowlands for development to relieve socioeconomic tensions and land pressure in the highlands. The northern frontier contains virtually all the land in Guatemala that is available for colonization. Although the soils are generally thin and vulnerable to erosion when misused, Guatemalan Land Reform Institute (INTA) reports indicate that nearly two-thirds of the land has good agricultural potential if properly managed.

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As early as the 1950s there had been spontaneous movement of highland Indians to the lowland areas, and by the late 1960s Maryknoll missionaries settled landless peasants from Huehuetenango in the Northern Transversal Zone. The major thrust for development, however, came in the 1970s as a result of international economic pressures. First, a dramatic rise in international grain prices caused import costs to soar; the cost of corn imports, for example, rose from less than \$1 million in 1972 to more than \$9 million in 1974. Changes in government plans and programs indicate that Guatemala’s large peasant farmer population came to be viewed by decision-makers as a potential force for increasing food supplies and reducing imports by expanding agricultural production in the northern lowlands.

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A second major stimulus for frontier development was the quantum leap in energy prices in 1973-74. Official Guatemalan trade data on energy imports show that the cost of oil rose from \$34 million in 1973 to \$92 million in 1974. Coincidental with this price rise was the discovery of the first commercial oil deposit in Guatemala, at Rubelsanto in the northern frontier.

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The Northern Frontier

For development planning, Guatemala's northern frontier is divided into two parts, the Northern Transversal Zone and Peten Department. The former (more than 9,000 square kilometers in extent) includes the northern portions of the departments of Huehuetenango, Quiche, Alta Verapaz, and Izabal and consists of heavily forested limestone hills and plains; only the western portion is mountainous, and even there the warm lower slopes and valleys adjacent to the Mexican border offer considerable development potential. The Peten (Guatemala's largest department, with 36,000 square kilometers—a third of the total national territory) also consists largely of limestone hills and plains; the Montanas Mayas, rising to elevations over 600 meters and extending into Belize in the southeast, and the Sierra del Lacandon, with elevations over 300 meters extending into Mexico in the northwest, are the only mountainous areas. Much of the department is still heavily forested although parts have been cut either in lumbering operations or by settlers; the latter are concentrated in the central and southwestern portions of the department.

The northern frontier includes considerable land suitable for the production of basic food crops (corn, beans, African palm) as well as export crops (cacao, rubber, cardamon, citrus). Many areas unsuited for

cultivation or for tree crops can be used to expand poultry, honey, and beef production; as of 1980 the Peten already accounted for 20 percent of the national beef herd. There are extensive forests with valuable trees, including mahogany and cedar, for the lumber industry. In 1980 a dozen sawmills in the Peten produced nearly 10 million board feet; with improved infrastructure and management, production could be greatly expanded. Energy resources constitute another important asset of the northern frontier that has only recently begun to be exploited. A large hydroelectric potential is available through harnessing the Rio Usumacinta or other rivers. On the Rio Chixoy, for example, the Xalala project could add 360 megawatts to the national energy network by 1990. Oil, found thus far in Guatemala only in the northern frontier, is being commercially produced at Rubelsanto. Current production is 10,000 barrels per day (about one-third of domestic consumption), almost all of which is exported because of the lack of domestic facilities for processing heavy crude; some domestic oil is used as bunker fuel in thermoelectric and cement plants. Evidence of oil has been discovered in two additional concession areas. There is little agreement among oil experts as to the extent of the reserves, but some believe that they could make Guatemala self-sufficient before the end of the decade.

In the 1970s successive Guatemalan governments focused national development efforts on the northern frontier. Some 540,000 hectares of Peten Department and 620,000 hectares of the Northern Transversal Zone were designated for agricultural development. By October 1979, Embassy reporting was referring to the Northern Transversal Zone as Guatemala's "development showcase." The vigor of northern development during the late 1970s and early 1980s was evidenced by the following accomplishments:

- Completion of an all-weather road from Coban to Rubelsanto in 1975, followed by construction and improvements in the Transversal Highway west to Playa Grande and east to Modesto Mendez in 1977-78, thereby opening new lands for spontaneous

settlement and organized colonization. A large bridge spanning the Rio Dulce was dedicated in 1980, eliminating dependence on a ferry and providing a key link between northern and southern Guatemala; and a road connecting the Transversal Highway and Sayaxche was completed in July 1982.

- Construction of an international airport at Santa Elena, improvements in the airport at the Mayan ruins of Tikal, and paving of the Santa Elena-Tikal road in 1981 to stimulate tourism.

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Excavation for material used in building the Transversal Highway reveals the limestone rock underlying virtually all of the northern frontier. The topography that results from weathering of the limestone is characterized by irregular hillocks, sinkholes, caverns, and underground streams—excellent country for guerrilla operations. The thin, easily eroded soils require careful management for agricultural use.

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- Construction of a pipeline connecting the Rubelsanto and Chinaja oilfields with the port of Santo Tomas de Castilla in 1979, enabling modest oil exports in 1980.
- An expanded program of organized land settlement. Of particular note are efforts by the Guatemalan Land Reform Institute (INTA) in the Peten, where 18 cooperatives were functioning by 1980, most along the Rio de la Pasion and Rio Usumacinta. Also significant are the joint US AID-INTA project known locally as Project 520, which will settle 3,500 families in some 50 villages over a 50,000-hectare tract along the Mexican border between the Rio

Chixoy and Rio Xalbal, and the expansion of Ixcán Grande, a project sponsored by Maryknoll missionaries of Huehuetenango.

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- An accelerated program of peasant land titling. Analysis of INTA data indicates that 90 percent of all land titling between 1971 and 1981 pertained to frontier colonization areas. Titling has involved not only formal colonization areas such as Ixcán Grande, Project 520, and Sayaxche, but also thousands of spontaneous settlers in the eastern part of the Northern Transversal Zone and along the San Luis-Santa Elena and Santa Elena-Melchor de Mencos roads.

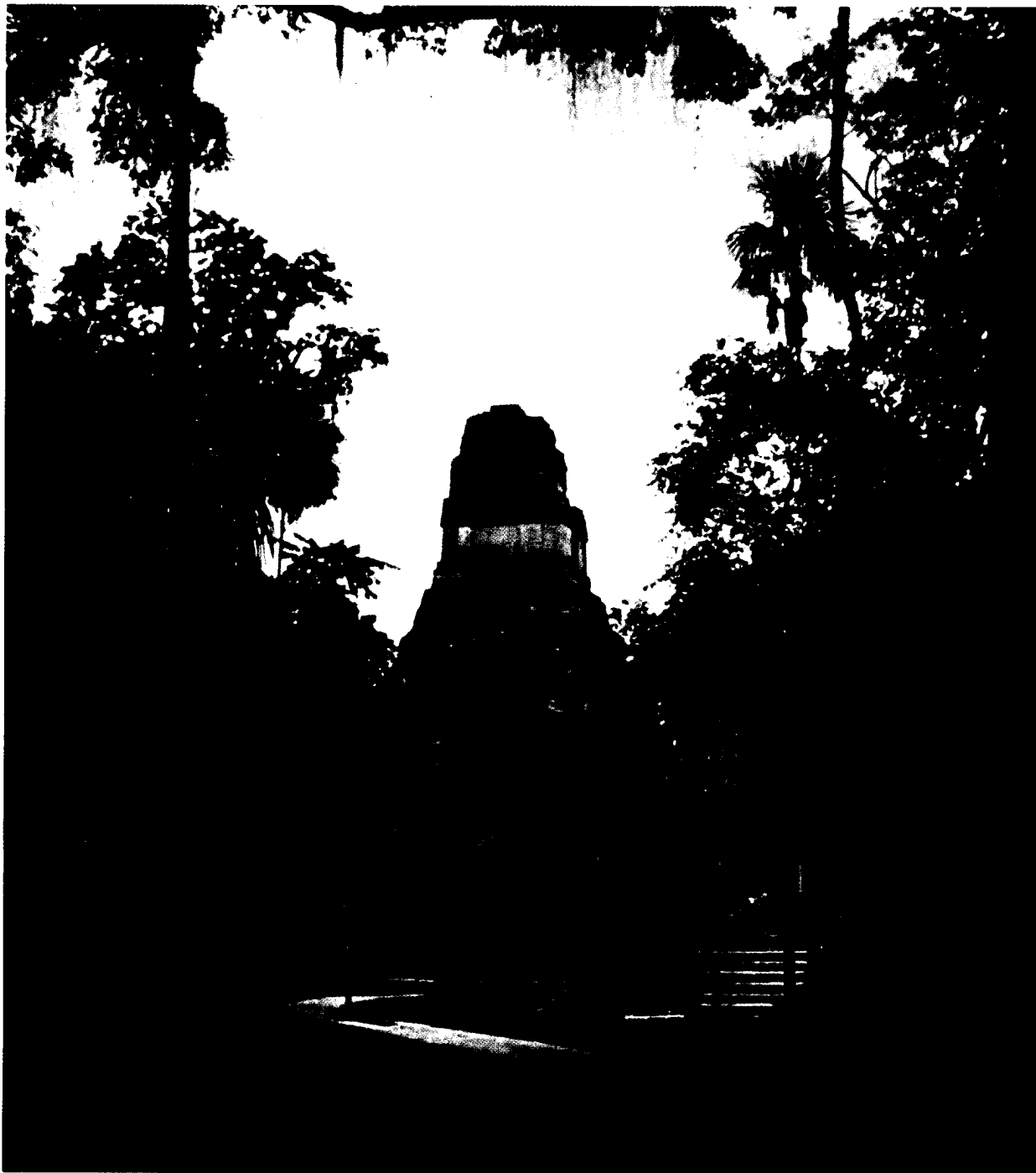
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Limestone pyramid rises from ruins of the ancient Maya metropolis of Tikal in the Peten. The city once held at least 50,000 people—far more than any present-day settlement in the northern lowlands; recent archeological research suggests that it was not only a ceremonial site but a true urban center supported by a sophisticated agricultural system of canals and raised fields. Attacks by leftist guerrillas have discouraged tourism.

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Young pioneers at Rubelsanto in the Northern Transversal Zone who migrated from the highlands of Quiche with their families in 1980. They cultivate corn and beans and cut firewood in the nearby forest.



A typical frontier home and cleared field in the Northern Transversal Zone. The Guatemalan Government promotes commercial farming and the production of perennial and tree crops such as cardamon, rubber, and cacao; but most settlers plant corn and other basic crops for their own consumption.

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Insurgency and the Northern Frontier

Militating against the positive developments noted above has been a long series of actions by the leftist guerrillas—including raids on towns, destruction of economic targets, and ambushes of military patrols—all of which forced the government by mid-1981 to concentrate on combating the insurgency. Widespread violence in the western highlands made recruitment for frontier colonization schemes virtually impossible as peasants balked at attending meetings or having their names placed on any list. Within the frontier region, the disruptions and insecurity associated with the insurgency severely hindered economic production and development.

The spread and success of insurgency in the northern frontier are, in large part, a result of the region's remoteness from the government's main centers of control and its rugged natural environment. Roads leading into the region are few, and vast areas are accessible only on foot. The combination of dense vegetation, locally rugged terrain, and generally sparse population makes the region well suited for guerrilla operations. The dense vegetation, although a

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One of five producing wells in the Rubelsanto-Chinaja oil-fields that together provide about 10,000 barrels of oil per day. Oil and, for the first time in Guatemala, gas deposits have recently been discovered to the east of Rubelsanto.



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Desulfurization plant at Rubelsanto. Because the local crude oil is high in sulfur content, it must be processed at this facility before entering the pipeline. The plant was occupied and damaged by insurgents in 1981.

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Vehicles with seismic equipment for oil exploration move through the forest near the Peten-Alta Verapaz border east of Rubelsanto.

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The Insurgency

The current insurgency in Guatemala can be traced to the early 1960s when disgruntled former Army officers and leftist students joined in a guerrilla war against the government. Dislodged from rural strongholds in the east, they turned to urban terrorism. By the early 1970s, apparently concluding that the support of the large Indian population was needed, they became active in the western highlands; for the remainder of the decade they concentrated, with some success, on recruitment and entrenchment. In 1980

the number of combatant insurgents was about 2,000 and growing,

insurgents controlled 85 percent of the Department of Huehuetenango. Extensive areas elsewhere were also believed to be in guerrilla hands. But over the past six months US Embassy reports indicate that counterinsurgency by government forces has significantly reduced the area under insurgent control.

The three most active insurgency organizations are: the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), created in the early 1960s; the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), an offshoot of the FAR dating from the early 1970s; and the Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA), a splinter group from the EGP that began operations in 1979. A November 1982 assessment placed the number of full-time insurgents at 2,000 to 3,000—with the FAR at 150 to 300, the EGP at about 1,000 to 1,300, and the ORPA at about 600 to 800. (We estimate the Guatemalan armed forces at more than 25,000 men.) The insurgents have received considerable support, including training, from Cuba, but they continue to be plagued by disunity.



Army patrol looking for insurgents. Dense vegetation covering much of the northern lowlands provides excellent hiding places and sites from which to stage ambushes.



A well-armed band of insurgents, members of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor.

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hindrance to small groups on foot, provides excellent concealment from air and ground observation. Cover from small-arms fire is provided by depressions, hills, and steep-banked streams. Most of the population is concentrated in small villages, and broad areas are practically uninhabited, making unobserved movement possible over long distances. Wood for fuel and shelter is plentiful, and many limestone caves and Mayan ruins can be used for shelter and as hiding places. Although game is scarce in the densely forested areas, fish and edible plants abound and additional food is available from scattered farms. []

Capitalizing on these geographic advantages, the insurgents have struck at numerous targets throughout the northern frontier. The impact of their actions is well illustrated at Tikal, the famous Mayan archeological site, which once attracted tens of thousands of tourists each year. The site was attacked in October 1980 and again in September 1981; during the latter attack, according to press reports, leftist guerrillas harangued a group of tourists and local workers, burned several buildings, and ransacked a museum. This and similar incidents elsewhere have almost destroyed Guatemala's once-prospering tourist industry. []

Insurgents operating north of Chisec in April and May of 1981 repeatedly blew up portions of the oil pipeline, according to US Embassy reporting. During the same period the oil desulfurization plant at Rubelsanto was occupied by guerrillas who, according to an eyewitness, fired into the control room and exploded dynamite near critical machinery []

Violence associated with the insurgency and counter-insurgency spurred the exodus of thousands of peasants from the northern frontier, many of them fleeing into Mexico, a movement well covered in the Guatemalan and Mexican press over the past two years. Particularly hard hit was the area around Sayaxche, where a number of villages were completely abandoned. Sayaxche itself was also subject to insurgent attacks, with one in September 1981 resulting in three deaths, thousands of dollars in damage, and the looting of a local branch of the National Development Bank. []

Work on Project 520 in the Northern Transversal Zone was slowed as a result of increasing violence, and by February 1982 all activity ceased as key personnel were withdrawn from the area. The Guatemalan Army, probably to deny support to insurgents, forced the abandonment of two villages and burned a third. []

[] the situation has improved since March, and most of those who fled have returned. []

During the latter half of 1982, the government initiated a two-pronged effort known as Campaign Victory 82 to put the insurgents on the defensive. One part of the program involved a reduction of military repression, a monthlong amnesty opportunity, the relocation of villages away from areas of heavy conflict, and the provision of basic needs to refugees. The other part of the program included the formation of local militias to protect villages and an increase in patrols and sweep operations by military forces to root out guerrillas and disrupt their support structure. According to US Embassy reporting, more than 5,000 reservists were activated and 10 new rifle companies were assigned to military commands in the northern frontier—five to Poptun and five to Playa Grande. []

The government's aggressive pursuit of guerrillas and formation of local militia units have shown good results over the past six months. Many areas formerly in guerrilla hands have been brought under government control, and the support structure that had been built up by the insurgents in past years has been seriously disrupted. The increased activity, however, has left thousands of refugees dependent on the government for survival. For example, following a major sweep in the Northern Transversal Zone by government troops in mid-November, some 5,000 or more Indian peasants, many severely malnourished, streamed into the town of Chisec seeking the protection of the Guatemalan Army; according to US Embassy reports, they claimed that previously they had been forced to cooperate with the insurgents. []

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Indians

About half of Guatemala's 7 million inhabitants are Indians, physically and culturally. The majority are concentrated in the highlands of the western and central portions of the country, although some are scattered through the northern lowlands as well. Localism and language differences—there are several major language groups and many different dialects—have militated against Indian unity and limited their participation in national affairs. It is the Indian peasantry that has suffered most in the current insurgency. Of the quarter-million people that the Guatemalan Government estimates as having been dislocated in the fighting, the majority are from predominantly Indian areas. Some of the Indians have been induced to join the guerrillas.

Despite insurgent success in organizing support networks among the Indians of some localities, often through intimidation, we have no evidence that Indians have joined the insurgent ranks as combatants in great numbers. If development of the northern frontier is resumed and maintained at a steady pace, economic pressures in the highlands should be reduced and the lot of many Indians improved.



Government troops train local militia in a highland village. Similar units have recently been organized in the northern frontier.

Despite government successes, the northern frontier remains a highly active theater of insurgency and counterinsurgency.

action has focused around Sayaxche, El Naranjo, Laguna San Diego, and along the Poptun-Flores highway in the Peten; the area adjacent to the Mexican border from Playa Grande to Nenton in the Northern Transversal Zone has been particularly active.

Conclusion and Outlook

If security is finally established in the northern frontier—as we believe it will be—and development proceeds, the region could help ameliorate the serious economic and social conditions plaguing Guatemala by providing land to many landless peasants, increasing the amount and variety of agricultural products for domestic consumption and export, and reducing

balance-of-payments problems through forestry, tourism, and oil production. Overall, government anti-insurgency efforts in Guatemala appear to be progressing. The resettlement of Project 520 and the return of villagers to Nenton, a settlement in the western portion of the Northern Transversal Zone that was also abandoned early this year, are signs that security is being restored in some areas of the northern frontier. But the geography of the region militates against any early total suppression of the insurgency there; its remoteness from centers of national power, its long, poorly patrolled international borders, and its physical characteristics all favor a protracted struggle by the guerrillas. The insurgency has severely disrupted development programs in the northern frontier and will continue to do so until more security is established.

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*Villager receives instruction from soldier in the use of a firearm.
Many militia units have been equipped with little more than sticks
and machetes.*

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Development and Insurgency in the Northern Frontier

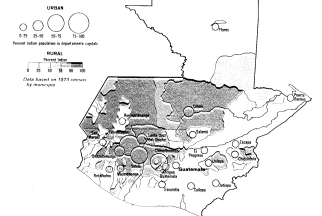


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Population



Indian Population



Vegetation



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